Crisis Communication Tips

(Adapted from the CDC's Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Guide and Peter Sandman)

- Participate in a crisis and/or risk communication course before you find yourself in a crisis situation.

- Don't over-reassure. The objective is not to placate but to elicit accurate, calm concern about the situation. If you have to amend the estimate of damage or victims, it's better to amend it down, not up. The public tolerates "It's less serious than we thought" better than "It's more serious than we thought."

- Tell people what to expect. If you are aware of future negative outcomes, let people know.

- Acknowledge uncertainty. Offer only what you know. Show your distress and acknowledge your audience's distress. "It must be awful to hear that we can't answer that question right now …"

- Emphasize that a process is in place to learn more. Describe the process in simple terms.

- Be regretful, not defensive. Say, "We are sorry …" or "We feel terrible that …" when acknowledging misdeeds or failures from the organization. Don't use "regret," which sounds like you're preparing for a lawsuit.

- Acknowledge people's fears. Don't tell people they shouldn't be afraid. They are afraid and they have a right to their fears. Don't disparage fear; acknowledge that it's normal and human to be frightened.

- Acknowledge the shared misery. Some people will be less frightened than they are miserable, feeling hopeless and defeated. Acknowledge the misery of a catastrophic event, then help move people forward toward the future through positive actions.

- Express wishes. Say, "I wish we knew more," or "I wish our answers were more definitive."

- Adopt a policy of full disclosure about what is and not known. Avoid being overly confident in the initial phases of the incident. It is better to admit that something is unknown than to make firm but unfounded declarations in an attempt to provide reassurance.

- Panic is less common than imagined. Panic doesn't come from bad news, but from mixed messages. If people are faced with conflicting recommendations and expert advice, they are left with no credible source to turn to for help. That level of abandonment opens the door to charlatans and poor judgment. Candor protects your credibility and reduces the possibility of panic, because your messages will ring true.

- Understand and be sensitive to the culture of the audience. You don't want to make matters worse.

- Be willing to address the "what if" questions. These are the questions that everyone is thinking about and they want expert answers. Although it's often impractical to fuel "what ifs" when the crisis is contained and not likely to affect large numbers of people, it is reasonable to answer "what ifs" if the "what ifs" could happen and people need to be emotionally prepared for them. If you do not answer the "what if" questions, someone at much less risk regarding the outcome of the response will answer them for you. If you are not prepared to address "what ifs," you lose credibility and the opportunity to frame the "what if" questions with reason and valid recommendations.

- Give people things to do. In an emergency, some actions are directed at victims, and those exposed or have the potential to be exposed. However, those who do not need to take immediate action will be engaging in "vicarious rehearsal" regarding those recommendations and may need substitute actions to ensure that they do not prematurely act on recommendations not meant for them. Simple actions in an emergency will give people a sense of control and will help to motivate them to stay tuned to what is happening (versus denial, where they refuse to acknowledge the possible danger to themselves and others) and will prepare them to take action when directed to do so. Give people a choice of actions matched to their level of concern. Give a range of responses: a minimum response, a maximum response, and a recommended middle response.

- Ask more of people. Ask people to bear the risk and work toward solutions with you. People can tolerate considerable risk, especially voluntary risk. If you acknowledge the risk's severity and complexity, and recognize people's fears, you can then ask the best of them. A spokesperson, especially one who is on the ground and at personal risk, can model the appropriate behavior – not false happiness, but true willingness to go on with life as much as possible and to make reasonable choices. Don't be glib – be stalwart. Your determination to face risk will help others looking for role models. Americans have great heart, a sense of selflessness, and a natural competitiveness. Sparking those inherent attributes will help people cope with uncertainty, fear, and misery.